

Weapons of Mass Instruction: Schoolbooks and Democratization in Multiethnic Central Europe¹

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Abstract • History schoolbooks are part of a much broader legitimization process through which every society's ruling elite secures the uncritical acceptance of the existing political, social and economic system, together with the cultural attributes that reflect its hegemony. In central Europe, the need to justify the creation of nation-states at the beginning and end of the twentieth century has generated proprietary accounts that have pitted the region's national groups against one another. Post-communist democratization has intensified these divisions as political leaders feel obliged to employ hoary myths—and avoid inconvenient facts—about their country's history in order to survive the electoral process. In this way they succumb to the "Frankenstein Syndrome" by which the history taught in the schools destroys those who dare to challenge the artificial constructs of the past. The article surveys history teaching throughout central Europe, with special emphasis on the Yugoslav successor states.

Keywords • Balkans, Central Europe, democracy/democratization, education, "Frankenstein syndrome," legitimization, myth/mythmaking, schoolbooks, Serbia, Yugoslavia

There is no greater ridicule of a person's ignorance than to exclaim that "Even a schoolchild knows that!" But what does he or she know? And, more important, what information does a child accept as fact before reaching adulthood? Although social scientists have written extensively about the crucial role that schoolbooks and other children's media play in forming a nation's values and mass memory, the public itself remains largely ignorant of its pervasive role in pre-determining a country's destiny. Together with television and child-



hood religious instruction, schoolbooks and classroom instruction are among the most influential forms of mass media because they provide the first imprint on our memory at a time when we are least capable of distinguishing fact from fiction. Once internalized, their message provides a prism through which all subsequent information is viewed and, therefore, accepted as true or rejected as false.

In this sense schoolbooks are part of a much greater legitimization process through which each society's ruling elites wins the largely uncritical acceptance of the existing political, social, and economic system, together with the cultural attributes that reflect its hegemony. Once attained, its legitimacy fosters patriotism that manifests itself in a reflexive personal loyalty and commitment to self-sacrifice that promotes societal stability and consensus. But all societies pay a price for undergoing this process of legitimization, namely by impressing their particular value system on future generations, each of which is pre-programmed by the elders so that it perpetuates the values ad infinitum. Of course, each generation grows and changes somewhat through its own life experiences. But one thing that it never experiences—and, therefore, never changes—is the past. Once a ruling elite has created a specific, proprietary narrative of its nation's history, this record becomes fixed in popular memory.

Although original research by individual scholars might question the misleading or wholly false "myths" that have been created, their platform cannot compete with the images propagated by popular media. Nor are scholars particularly disposed or equipped to engage the public sphere, choosing instead to limit their discourse to more sophisticated, but far smaller academic circles. Of course, prominent political leaders have at their disposal the means to expose such myths. But to do so invites political suicide, as the voting public ridicules their revisionism with the refrain that "even a schoolchild knows" the truth that has long been established through school instruction. Ironically, political leaders in authoritarian states are not subject to this "Frankenstein Syndrome" because they are less accountable to the public and have the coercive power to reshape written and visual representations of history, beginning with what is taught in the schools. Hence the relative ease with which authoritarian reformers from Ataturk to Gorbachev reshaped their societies from the top down.² Alas, democratic politicians have no such recourse, because challenging the past exposes them to preemptive electoral defeat.

As a rule, mass media is most persuasive when it delivers a simple message that engages the lowest common denominator of pub-

lic understanding. There is nothing simpler or more persuasive than elementary school literature and instruction, which impress “knowledge” on the virtual *tabula rasa* of young children, whose only other source of information is parents who had been subjected to the same acculturation process. Yet by sacrificing nuance and qualification, children’s schoolbooks inevitably discard inconvenient historical facts, while inventing more desirable alternatives. Such contrivances have been a common commodity to nation-builders everywhere, including the most celebrated Western democracies. For example, children across the Anglo-Saxon world have been taught that the Magna Carta was a milestone on the path to democracy rather than the triumph of the English aristocracy. British schools extol the glories of their far-flung empire, without dwelling on the political, economic, and cultural subjugation of the people they “civilized.” American schoolbooks duly stress the oppression of British rule with the refrain “no taxation without representation,” but never mention London’s attempt to outlaw the slave trade that serviced the plantations of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. Nor do they allude to the human rights of up to 100,000 loyalists who were compelled to emigrate after independence had been achieved.³ Schoolbooks celebrate the heroism inherent in John Paul Jones’s defiant battle cry “I have not yet begun to fight” without mentioning that his naval career began as a slave trader and ended with his dismissal from the Russian navy following the rape of a young girl.⁴ Nor is any attempt made to challenge the popular myth that the nation’s “Founding Fathers” were devout Christians, even though successive presidents dissociated themselves and the new republic from the Christian religion.⁵ From earliest childhood, Frenchmen celebrate Bastille Day for the storming of a hated political prison, oblivious to the banal crimes of its mere seven inmates (four counterfeiters, two lunatics, and a notorious philanderer); of less importance are the horrific crimes that France’s revolutionary governments committed against their fellow countrymen during the Reign of Terror or against those Europeans whom their armies “liberated.”

Though inaccurate and prejudicial, schoolbooks in countries like Great Britain, France, and the United States have served the purpose of instilling national pride and patriotism without fostering conflict either at home or abroad. This is because the carefully cultivated celebration of their nations’ genius and love for democracy appeals to commonly held values that reaffirm a unified national identity. Meanwhile, the specter of “tyrannical” monarchs like Louis XVI and George III no

longer stalk the national conscientiousness. Nor do Americans harbor fear or resentment of their erstwhile British overlords, whom they banished almost immediately after identifying them (rightly or wrongly) as oppressors. It is this fortuitous absence of domestic enemies or previous foreign subjugation that separates most Western historical narratives from those of most other countries. There is no need to base virtue and loyalty on the repudiation of “others” who live among you or nearby.

Nowhere is this distinction more evident than in the states of contemporary Central Europe. Twice during the twentieth century its peoples have experienced the euphoria of “freedom” both in the form of independence and democracy. Not unlike much of the non-Western world, they are the product of defunct multinational empires that were ostensibly supranational, but which were dominated by the elite of a single national group. Thus, Central Europe’s Habsburg and Ottoman empires and, later, Soviet bloc successor states faced the daunting task of creating a common national identity despite being the homeland of several ethnic groups, including members of the previously dominant nation who were left behind as a distinct and mistrusted residual minority. On both occasions, schoolbooks and other mass media forged a national self-image by creating a historical narrative that justified independence by minimizing the achievements of the formerly multiethnic polities, while promoting a special place for the majority—“state-forming” nation. Meanwhile, ethnic minorities were denied a place in the new country’s history books, while the negative account of its previous bondage placed a special burden on those groups that had been closely associated with the former imperial power.

There was no dearth of scapegoats. Newly minted Albanian and Slovakian textbooks spoke of oppression by Ottoman and Hungarian overlords, without explaining why both groups had only recently fought in vain to prevent their “liberation” by Serb and Czech forces.⁶ The Czechs themselves initiated the century-long practice of portraying the Habsburg monarchy as an instrument of German oppression. Thus the Thirty Years War (1618–48) in Bohemia was taught not as a quintessential Counter Reformation struggle between Catholics and Protestants, but as a German conquest of the Czech nation—even though most of the Bohemian rebel leadership was German, while the country’s re-Catholicization was carried out in Czech. Similarly, the “Revolutionary Emperor” Joseph II (1765–1790), who liberated Bohemia’s Protestants and Jews from religious persecution, its serfs from

feudal bondage, and its peasantry population from illiteracy in Czech, was dismissed as a tyrant and remorseless agent of Germanization.⁷

At the same time, residual or newly created minorities were written out of the new nations' histories. The Polish nation-state that was created in 1919 yearned to replicate the territorial expanse of its eighteenth-century forebear without acknowledging that it had been a multiethnic confederation that had readily accommodated parallel languages and religions. Although it had more than doubled in size through the acquisition of Austrian, Hungarian, Russian, and Bulgarian territory, postwar Romania excluded its new minorities and regions from the national narrative by imposing a uniform school curriculum crafted in Bucharest.⁸ The leaders of central Europe's two multiethnic states were slightly more inclusive. In Prague schoolbook publishers strained to contrive a common history for the country's two principal—but previously separate—state-forming nations. Their counterparts in Belgrade were less successful in imposing a uniform body of school texts on the Kingdom of Serbs, Croatians, and Slovenes that afforded due attention to the history and culture of its three constituent peoples.⁹ Yet, even if they had succeeded, the country's Albanians, Macedonians, Bosniaks, Germans, and Hungarians remained largely anonymous.

World War II ushered in some changes into the textbook literature. Having already expunged from its historical consciousness the large Bulgarian and Turkish populations that had been expelled or "transferred" from Macedonia and Thrace between 1912 and 1923, Greek schoolbooks were relieved of the need to recount the substantial Jewish community that had been annihilated by the Nazis.¹⁰ Similarly, Czechoslovakia complemented the postwar expulsion of three million ethnic Germans by writing them out of the country's history.¹¹ But the biggest overall change was effected by the imposition of four decades of communism throughout Europe's eastern half. After all, Marxism's appeal to the solidarity of the working class left little room for national identity, competition, and conflict. In Marshall Tito's Yugoslavia, appeals to the "unity and brotherhood" of the country's nineteen officially recognized national and ethnic groups complemented attacks in schoolbooks against the fratricidal wartime struggle between Serb Četnik and Croat Ustaša nationalists. Yet, if Marx was correct in characterizing religion as the opiate of the people, then communism was surely no better than the methadone of nationalism. Once it had been removed from the scene, the nationalist cravings that had afflicted central Europeans at the beginning of

the twentieth century now returned with a vengeance at its close. Indeed, the constitutional division of Yugoslavia into eight virtually independent entities in 1974 had already guaranteed the separate development of an equal number of historical narratives in the country's schools, universities, and mass media that helped fuel its subsequent dissolution.¹²

The second coming of independence and democracy has not only revived, but added to the historical narratives of the region's national groups. Much as they did following the Great War, schoolbooks minimize the record of coexistence and collaboration between national and ethnic groups, while stressing the conflicts between them. In their rush to dissociate themselves from their Yugoslav legacy, Slovenian schoolbooks ignore the remarkable economic and demographic advances that the Slovenes made under Belgrade's tutelage.¹³ The latest generation of Serbian history textbooks overlooks the contribution of other national groups to the former Yugoslavia to the point of appropriating most of the credit for the wartime resistance to fascism. It also passes over in silence the high incidence of intermarriage in postwar Yugoslavia and represents the cultural ambience as distinctly Serb. According to Belgrade's Institute for Educational Research, the country's conquest, occupation, and oppression during the Ottoman Empire and the two world wars is taught in the third grade.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, the Croats are singled out for special attention. *Programi osnovne škole* (Programs for Elementary Schools) (2000) blames them for the dissolution of both the kingdom and socialist republics of Yugoslavia, while also emphasizing the mass slaughter of Serb civilians during World War II. Both *Istorija za 8. razred osnovne škole* (History for 8th Grade of Elementary Education) (1997) and *Istorija za II razred prirodno-matematičkog smera* (History for 2nd Year of Natural Sciences—Mathematics Courses) (1997) portray Croats as murderers and intrinsically Serbophobic—quite a remarkable picture to paint in schoolbooks intended for third and fourth grade children. Although children as young as eight years old are introduced to the concept of genocide, their exposure continues as they progress through the school system. Thus, *Programi osnovne škole* (2000) affords eighth graders a special unit devoted to the World War II concentration camp in "Jasenovac: The Mass Grave of Serbs." There is even a historical atlas for primary school instruction featuring a map of genocide committed by Croats, Hungarians, Germans, Albanians, and Bulgarians within the borders of former Yugoslavia. Alas, none of the new generation of schoolbooks dwells on comparable crimes committed

either by the Četniks during World War II or by Serbian military or paramilitary forces during the recent succession conflicts in Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo. On the contrary, it has continued a trend that began under the Milošević regime, whereby the Četniks were rehabilitated as freedom fighters against both fascism and communism. Nor are the Serbs alone in rewriting national World War II history. Despite isolated calls for Croatia to confront the genocide committed by the wartime Ustaša government, the most recent textbooks prefer to dwell on its patriotic struggle for independence against communism and a Serb enemy that is represented with “gruesomely racist” stereotypes that justify the bloody secessions of 1941 and 1991.¹⁵ Nor do today’s Slovenian textbooks acknowledge the extensive collaboration with German and Italian occupation forces during World War II, while redefining the fascist Slovene “Home Guards” as anti-communist freedom fighters.¹⁶

Indeed, the four Yugoslav wars of succession (from 1991 to 1999) have afforded one more opportunity for mutual recrimination in the tendentious national narratives being taught in the schools. The cleavage is sustained in ethnically mixed Bosnia through the creation of separate schools for Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs, each with its own history curriculum. Even in the Kosovo “protectorate,” where UN officials prohibit negative references to any ethnic group in school texts, the teachers themselves freely articulate proprietary narratives that either praise Slobodan Milošević as a Serb patriot or the Kosovo Liberation Army as heroic freedom fighters.¹⁷

But the Yugoslav successor states remain in good Central European company in their selective portrayal of centuries of oppression at the hands of imperial powers and neighboring ethnic groups. Today’s Polish schoolbooks cover the horrors of the Nazi occupation, including the Holocaust against the country’s three million Jews, although not about crimes that the Poles themselves—including the underground Polish Home Army—committed against them. Even as post-communist Romania and Slovakia rehabilitate the Axis regimes of Antonescu and Tiso, their schoolbooks remain silent about their own forces’ role in the execution of an estimated 300,000 Ukrainian Jews. And, whereas today’s Czech schoolchildren are briefly informed of the fate of the Sudeten Germans, the expulsion is represented as justified retaliation for the erstwhile *volksdeutsch* minority’s collective guilt in collaborating with the Nazis.

Of course, the German expellees were not indigenous to historic Bohemia. Nor are the Hungarians of Transylvania, whose arrival is

dated in Romanian schoolbooks a millennium after the Latin-speaking Dacians first settled there. Like the Romanians, Albanians teach their children that their ancestors were already on the ground during ancient times. Not to be outdone, the new schoolbook *Karpatski i Likijski Srbi* (Carpathian and Lycian Serbs) (1997) traces the Serbs to the pre-Roman Etruscans, effectively making them the progenitor of all European Slavs. Although the author does not appear intent on reclaiming the Apennine peninsula, several other textbooks employ history to stake their claim to a Greater Serbia in which Croats and Bosniaks are identified merely as Serbs who somehow drifted from Orthodoxy. In short, schoolbooks and the generations educated by them justify their national destinies based not only on their incompatibility with competing national groups but also on their prior occupation of the lands to which they aspire.

And so it is that many Central European nations are divided by a common history, one recounted using a different array of facts, many of which are either distorted or blatantly untrue. The resulting divergent recitations of history have divided nations by sowing mistrust, resentment, and hatred between people who coexisted with one another for long periods of time. Today, the deepest divide of all separates the great majority of ethnic Serbs (in both Serbia and Bosnia's Republika Srpska) from virtually all other national groups in Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo, and Slovenia. Nevertheless, there are many other cultural divides beyond the borders of the former Yugoslavia that separate other previously dominant nations elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe such as the Germans, Hungarians, Poles, Russians, and Turks from neighboring national groups. After a century of interregional conflict, perhaps Central Europe's nation-states would be better served by a new generation of schoolbooks that can inspire loyalty and patriotism without using history to spread mistrust and resentment between both its own ethnic groups and neighboring countries.

Since the 1995 signing of the Dayton Peace Accords, the international community has worked to bridge the cognitive gap between the peoples of the Yugoslav successor states. Western media platforms such as Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and the BBC have disseminated news and information, while philanthropic NGOs like the Soros, Friedrich-Naumann, and Bertelsmann foundations have sponsored numerous confidence-building, "people-to-people" programs. Several Western governments and NGOs have even initiated collaborative, interregional projects designed to examine the role that schoolbooks can play in overcoming the misconstrued past.

Yet none of these vehicles have been able to convert politicians and the great majority of “mainstream” media platforms, which articulate their views.¹⁸ This is hardly surprising because the proprietary accounts that have dominated public memory for a century or more have helped to construct an electoral Frankenstein that will preemptively destroy any civic and political leaders who attempt to dismantle them. Moreover, so long as they retain a de facto monopoly over public memory, perception, and interpretation, they will continue to discredit and marginalize the few independent voices that challenge them. Admittedly, there are many among the region’s political, academic, and media elite who privately concede the corruption of their vocal majority’s historical accounts, but who nonetheless lack the courage to take a public position. Hence the need is not only to acknowledge the pernicious dynamics of a legitimization process that imbues society with divisive “creation myths” but to counteract the Frankenstein Syndrome that democratization imposes on its leaders.

Notes

1. Portions of this article first appeared in Sqhip under the title “Armet e shakterrimit masiv” (Weapons of Mass Instruction: Schoolbooks and Ethnic Conflict), in *Kosova Observer* (Kosova and Balkan Observer, Prishtinë, 2004).
2. Admittedly, Gorbachev’s task was rendered easier by the Soviet Union’s failure to reinforce, based on experience, the utopian claims advanced by the Marxist narrative.
3. Most loyalists went to Canada, which claims three million of their descendants. Christopher Moore, *The Loyalist: Revolution, Exile, Settlement* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1994).
4. The girl was aged between ten and fourteen. In his defense, Jones claimed that the child had rendered her services willingly in exchange for money (Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994], 68).
5. As stated in Article 11 of the peace treaty with the government of Tripoli—signed by President Jefferson and ratified by the Senate in 1805—“the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion.” David Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) provides the kind of nuanced analysis that goes well beyond the simplistic representations of popular media.

6. Noel Malcolm, "The Myth of Albanian National Identity," in Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers and Bernd Fischer, eds., *Albanian Identities: Myth and History* (London: Hurst, 2002), 82–83.
7. Nancy Wingfield, "Conflicting Constructions of Memory: Attacks on Joseph II in the Bohemian Lands After the Great War," *The Austrian History Yearbook* 28 (1997), 151–53.
8. Irina Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 44–48.
9. Andrew Wachtel and Predrag Marković, "A Last Attempt at Educational Integration: the Failure of Common Educational Cores in Yugoslavia in the 1980s," in Lenard Cohen and Jasna Dragović-Soso, eds., *State Collapse in South-Eastern Europe: New Perspectives on Yugoslavia's Disintegration* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2007), 204–5.
10. Whose presence is still systematically excluded from written accounts and public commemoration. For the denial of Greece's Jewish presence, see Robert Kaplan's account of the eradication in *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1993), 233–40.
11. This process was abetted by the removal or Slavicization of German names and inscriptions on public monuments.
12. Wachtel and Marković, "A Last Attempt at Educational Integration," 206–17; Sabrina Ramet, "The Dissolution of Yugoslavia: Competing Narratives of Resentment and Blame," *Südost-Europa* 55, no. 1 (2007): 26–69.
13. James Gow and Cathie Carmichael, *Slovenia and the Slovenes: A Small State and the New Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 25, 102–7, 112, 134.
14. Aleksandra Petrović, "Prospettive sull' educazione ai diritti dell'uomo nella Repubblica serba," in Falk Pingel, ed., *Insegnare l'Europa: Concetti e rappresentazioni nei libri di testo europei* (Turin: Giovanni Agnelli, 2003), 527–39.
15. Cvijeto Job, *Yugoslavia's Ruin: The Bloody Lessons of Nationalism, a Patriot's Warning* (New York and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 219; Ramet "Dissolution of Yugoslavia," 31.
16. Oto Luthar, "Old Frame, New Picture: History Teaching in Slovenia After 1991," paper delivered at the Association for the Studies of Nationalities Annual Convention, Columbia University, New York, April 2004.
17. Fatmire Terdevci, "Heroes and Villains," *Transitions Online*, <http://www.tol.cz/look/TOL> (accessed 20 December 2006).
18. For a more detailed discussion of the responsibility of central European elites, see Charles Ingrao, "Delegitimizing Multiculturalism: Cultural Elites in the Old and New Central Europe," *Polemos* 6, nos. 1–2 (2003): 87–95.